

Los Angeles County Answering Service Solves Telephone Delays and Trains Inmates

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Over the past twenty-five years, the average daily population of the Los Angeles County jail system has doubled, from approximately 11,000 inmates in 1974 to 22,000 in seven sites in 1990. Such a rapid increase in jail population has caused difficulties related to crowding in housing areas and inmate programs and placed a severe strain on many Custody Division support services. To supplement these services, the Sheriff's Department has implemented an innovative program to provide public information about facilities and persons in custody that uses inmates to handle telephone inquiries.

The Problem

The Sheriff's Department first opened an Inmate Information Center (IIC) in 1974. Situated in the Inmate Reception Center, the IIC was designed to handle inquiries regarding an inmate's status and location, as well as visiting procedures, correspondence, and similar issues. From ten

telephone/computer positions, the IIC handled inquiries from the general public as well as confidential law enforcement and attorney/bondsmen inquiries.

The system originally handled inquiries related to a jail population of approximately 10,000 inmates. As the inmate population continued to grow, it became apparent that the IIC was unable to handle the increased workload and would be unable to handle the demands of the future.

In early 1984, the problems with the IIC reached crisis proportions. The inmate count was over 16,000, and the IIC could no longer meet public information needs. The Sheriff's Department, assisted by the local telephone company, conducted a two-day analysis of the IICs workload and productivity. Results included the following disturbing observations:

- The telephone equipment itself was inadequate to handle incoming calls and needed to be replaced by a state-of-the-art automatic call distributor.

- Many calls could be handled by a caller-accessed voice messaging system, which would answer basic inquiries on visiting hours and facility location without requiring an operator.
- The average completed call required eighty-four seconds to handle. However, the average delay in reaching a clerk was thirty minutes and ranged from seven to ninety-two minutes.
- Analysis revealed that more than 13,000 calls per day were going unanswered; many, of course, were frustrated repeat callers.

Clearly, the department was not meeting its obligation to the public to provide information about persons in custody. The expectation of additional problems due to further population growth mandated that the agency develop a creative solution that would meet current demands and be capable of future expansion.

Developing a Solution

The complexity of the jail crowding problem, coupled with fiscal constraints, made the solution

The program provides public information on facilities and persons in custody by using inmates to handle telephone inquiries.

difficult. Custody Division staff realized they needed a multidimensional plan that would address many jail crowding issues rather than the information issue alone. The department considered a variety of plans, ranging from hiring additional staff and upgrading the current system, to expanding and relocating the system, to relocating the system and using inmate labor.

Staff finally opted for relocation, system upgrades, expanded work stations, and inmate labor coupled with a vocational education program in telemarketing and office reception skills.

The crux of the solution was to center the project around the vocational education program. Because the project would provide

vocational education beneficial to inmates, it could be supported through the Inmate Welfare Fund.

The Inmate Welfare Fund is an accounting mechanism for the money inmates pay for educational and recreational services, including telephone service. Deregulation of the telephone industry enabled the department to contract for telephone service in its jails, with a percentage of the proceeds going to the Inmate Welfare Fund. By using money from the fund to meet construction, start up, and continuation expenses, the department was able to proceed with the project more quickly than if state general funds had been required. The vocational education component of the project justified this funding method.

Implementing the Solution

Several agency and county units, as well as the local school district, were involved in implementing the project (see box). Construction began early in 1989, and the new operation, dubbed the "Inmate Answering Service" (IAS), began operations on September 1.

Inmates were interviewed, tested, and selected for IAS positions during the week prior to implementation. A total of eighty inmate positions were needed to staff the IAS twenty-four hours per day, seven days a week, including time for training, continuing education, and days off. Operational staffing is twenty inmates on day and evening shifts

System and facility design specifications for the project were developed through the cooperative efforts of various Sheriff's Department and county units:

- The Sheriff's Department Data Systems Bureau helped develop controls in computer information access to ensure that the inmate operators could not obtain any restricted or confidential information. Bureau staff also designed back-up systems and a linkage with the existing computerized inmate data system.
- Los Angeles County's Internal Services Department assisted in developing and implementing plans for construction to support the two trailers that would house the unit. It was situated in an alcove adjacent to the main jail building, which allowed access to existing plumbing and electrical sources.
- The Communications Unit developed design specifications for a state-of-the-art telephone system with an automatic call director, a monitor for jail staff to observe the status and productivity of each telephone position, and an automated tone/pulse system to allow callers to access information by pushing various phone buttons.
- The Hacienda-La Puente Unified School District hired an instructor to develop the vocational education curriculum, covering primarily telemarketing, telecommunication, and office/reception skills. The curriculum is designed around independent work units, allowing inmates to enter the program at any time.

and ten inmates on the early morning (2300-0700 hours) shift.

Inmates are selected for work in the IAS based on their conduct in the facility and an assessment of their verbal and reading skills. To qualify, inmates must be able to read with comprehension at a seventh grade level.

The inmate workers, selected from minimum through maximum security classifications, are supervised by a deputy sheriff and a civilian custody assistant, who also handle unusual inquiries and potential problems.

The department maintains system security and prevents unauthorized communication by monitoring calls at random, recording all calls, and using a computer system that highlights any unusual calling patterns. The telephones are not used for calling out, and inmates are carefully trained to provide only limited information to the public regarding each jail facility.

The department also maintains separate telephone lines, staffed by department employees, to provide restricted or more detailed information on inmates for attorneys, bondsmen, and law enforcement agencies.

Beyond our expectations, IAS assignments have become highly prized by the inmate workers. The inmates value the clean, relaxed

atmosphere, as well as the opportunity to learn vocational skills. But

perhaps more important is the opportunity to provide a service that is useful to others in the community. As

one worker said, "This is the first time I've ever had a job where I felt I was doing something useful and important for others, and I love it!"

Results

The Inmate Answering Service has been fully functional for several months now, long enough to assess its impact upon operations.

The IAS receives an average of 4,000 telephone inquiries daily, approximately one-third of those received in the old system. Calls have decreased apparently because under the old system all calls were counted, even those that were never answered; therefore, each repeat attempt to reach an operator was counted as a new call.

Today, 96 percent of the calls are handled immediately, without delay to the citizen. The average wait has dropped from thirty minutes to ten seconds, a remarkable improvement by any standard. The department and the citizens it serves now have a dependable system that not only meets the current demand for inmate

information but can be expanded to meet future needs.

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Comparing old staffing costs to current costs is difficult because of doubts that the old system could ever have been fully staffed. However, it appears that the security costs for jail staff to supervise the inmates are similar to the costs the agency would have incurred by staffing the old system to an effective level with civilian clerks.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's use of inmate labor to meet the needs of its citizens has proven to be a cost-effective solution to the public information problems posed by its rapidly increasing jail population. Sheriff Sherman Block described the system well in his comments on the facility's dedication:

Our goal from the onset was two-fold: to provide better service to the community, while at the same time creating a viable training program for the inmates. Our hope is that many of these inmates will be able to better their lives and perhaps not return to this facility in the future.

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